

The Lion and the Fox: Whitlam, Bjelke-Petersen and the Queensland Electorate 1961–75

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Abstract: Queensland played a significant role in Gough Whitlam's political career as a federal politician. Whitlam's electioneering in the Sunshine State during the 1960s helped secure his reputation as a forward-thinking, progressive leader with both a national and regionally focused agenda. As a leading figure within the federal Labor Opposition, he skilfully employed a specific notion of 'Queensland difference' based on local resentment of perceived 'southern' neglect to enhance his appeal to Queensland voters. However, as prime minister (1972–75), his failure to maintain a strong connection with the Queensland electorate undid much of the political capital Whitlam had accumulated in the state during the previous decade. This was compounded by his increasingly toxic relationship with a state rights-oriented Queensland premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who, energised by his own version of 'Queensland difference', obstructed key aspects of Whitlam's national political agenda. Whitlam and Bjelke-Petersen's individual approaches to the political issue of 'Queensland difference' are compared and contrasted in this essay, and it is argued that, ultimately, both were reliant on the same emotional message to Queensland electors: the idea that Queenslanders wished to be noticed, respected outside the state and to be perceived as good as, and to have the same material advantages as, other Australians. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the continuities and discontinuities of federalism in Australia since the period under review.

As part of his character portrait of Gough Whitlam, historian Geoffrey Bolton wrote:

Machiavelli, whom Whitlam was fond of quoting, remarked that the prince should combine the qualities of the lion and the fox. Whitlam was a lion who deluded himself into thinking he could also play the fox.¹

Overconfident in his ability to push through his centralist agenda, and losing touch with the Queensland electorate between 1972 and 1975, the prime minister was politically ‘outfoxed’ by Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen on the latter’s home turf and sometimes on the national stage as well. The electoral rise and fall of Whitlam also highlights the importance of federal parties maintaining the perception of committed engagement with Queensland electors, a theme that continues to be a feature of political commentary on Commonwealth elections.²

The importance of Queensland to Whitlam’s career has largely been underplayed in nationally focused Australian political historiography. When it is mentioned at all, Queensland is either reduced to a cameo role in Whitlam’s rise to the prime ministership, such as the Dawson by-election of 1966, or, at best, Bjelke-Petersen’s contribution to the declining fortunes of the Whitlam government is briefly given centre stage in the narrative.³ The major exception to this rule has been Brian Costar’s 2006 article ‘Political Leadership and Queensland’, which reflected on the leadership styles of Whitlam and Bjelke-Petersen. Among other things, Costar argued that Bjelke-Petersen’s aggressive anti-Labor campaign cancelled out Whitlam’s political gains in Queensland:

1 Geoffrey Bolton, *The Oxford History of Australia Volume 5: The Middle Way 1942–1995* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1990]), 217. For the original quote, see: Niccolo Machiavelli, ‘The Prince’, chapter XVII, in *The Prince and the Discourses* (New York: Random House, 1950), 64.

2 For example, some political commentators attributed the swing against Labor in the 2019 federal election to the failure of then Opposition leader Bill Shorten and his team to secure broad appeal in a complex Queensland electorate divided by urban, regional and ideological differences in relation to issues such as the Adani coal mine development. See: John Wanna, ‘Political Chronicles: Commonwealth of Australia January to June 2019’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 65, no. 4 (2019): 655–56, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12626; Derek McDougall, ‘ScoMo’s Miracle: The Australian Federal Election of 18 May 2019’, *The Round Table* 108, no. 5 (2019): 498, doi.org/10.1080/00358533.2019.1657717. See also: Anne Tiernan, ‘Active Citizens, Constructive Answers: Taking Control of the Processes of Democracy’, *Griffith Review*, no. 67 (2020): 11–12.

3 See: Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press [hereafter MUP], 2008), 254–56; Jenny Hocking, *Gough Whitlam: His Time* (Melbourne: MUP, 2014), 300; Bolton, *Oxford History of Australia Vol. 5*, 236–37.

By exploiting and exaggerating traditional Queensland separatism and hostility to Canberra, Bjelke-Petersen crafted a political culture that was as inhospitable to the Whitlam style in the 1970s as the 1960s culture was welcoming.⁴

This article builds on Costar's insights by further investigating the popular assumption that Queensland has a distinctive political and cultural identity, a concept described by some scholars as 'Queensland difference'.⁵ The focus of this essay will be the specific aspect of 'Queensland difference' rhetoric most exploited by both Whitlam and Bjelke-Petersen to develop their political appeal among electors. That is, the idea that Queensland's interests were neglected or misunderstood by the Commonwealth. It is, of course, acknowledged in this article that 'Queensland difference' was employed by these two Australian politicians in ways that aligned with their own separate political worldviews. Whitlam's call for support among Queensland voters was framed firmly within what he believed a future ALP government could do to ameliorate Queensland neglect, focused on centralised, Commonwealth initiatives. Bjelke-Petersen's version of 'Queensland difference' was influenced by his political conservatism and insistence on state rights. Nevertheless, it will be argued that both men's use of the politics of 'Queensland difference' was ultimately reliant on the same emotional message: the idea that Queenslanders wanted to be noticed; be respected outside the state; and be perceived as being as good as, and as having the same material advantages as, other Australians.

'Queensland Difference': Political and Historical Context

Then Queensland Premier Anna Bligh delivered her most famous speech during the 2011 Queensland floods: 'We are Queenslanders ... We're the people that they breed tough north of the border. We're the ones that they

4 Brian Costar, 'Political Leadership and Queensland Nationalism', *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 19, no. 9 (2006): 79.

5 For examples of the use of the phrase 'Queensland difference' to describe Queensland cultural and political identity, see: Paul D. Williams, 'Queensland's Role in the 2019 Australian Federal Election: A Case Study of Regional Difference', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 67, no. 1 (2021): 4, doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12760; Peter Putnis, 'The Construction of Queensland: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 4 (1989): 39; Lyndon Megarrity, 'The Queensland Legend', *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 10, no. 2 (2008): 137.

knock down and we get up again.⁶ In this rallying statement, Bligh used the notion of Queensland's perceived difference from the rest of Australia to appeal to her electorate's sense of parochial pride and dignity. However, the idea of 'Queensland difference' is more complex and contradictory than Bligh's speech may lead Australians to believe. This essay does not intend to be drawn into a debate on the influence and extent of every strand of identified 'Queensland difference'. However, to understand Whitlam and Bjelke-Petersen's political clash—and the 'Queensland difference' rhetoric these leaders used—it is necessary to explore the historical context of Queensland and its government between 1901 and the 1960s. During this time, the state was intermittently engaged in a game of economic and social 'catch-up' with New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria.

More often than not, 'Queensland difference' is viewed by commentators as profoundly negative. An unanticipated Queensland result in a federal election or a local politician's eccentricity can lead to analysis implying that Queenslanders are 'different': slower to adopt the 'reforms' of their southern cousins, less cultured, less open to new ideas, more racist, more sexist and without the political sophistication of NSW and Victoria.⁷ The notion that reforms and systems originating from southern states should be the 'gold standard' to which Queensland should conform has sometimes been pushed by the same politicians who proudly proclaim 'Queensland difference'. Anna Bligh, for example, enthusiastically pushed the Beattie Labor government's education policies that introduced changes to pre-school, primary and high school education to bring Queensland 'into line' with NSW and Victorian norms.⁸

6 Anna Bligh, *Through the Wall: Reflections on Leadership, Love and Survival* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 258. The speech did not, however, prevent a landslide defeat for the Bligh government in the 2012 election.

7 For various overviews of 'Queensland difference' as a cultural and political phenomenon, see, for example: Megarrity, 'The Queensland Legend', 123–38; Humphrey McQueen, 'Queensland: A State of Mind', *Meanjin* 38, no. 1 (1979): 41–51; Costar, 'Political Leadership and Queensland Nationalism', 65–81.

8 These reforms included increasing the minimum age for children entering primary school and introducing Prep five days per week to assist with Queensland's educational competitiveness in national education tests. See: Maureen Truasheim, 'Prep—The New Transitional Year for Queensland Schools', *Curriculum Matters* 4, no. 1, (2005): 4–5; Bligh, *Through the Wall*, 128–35.



Figure 1: Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, c. 1973.

Source: Queensland State Archives, Digital Image ID 3077 © The State of Queensland (Department of the Premier and Cabinet), 2020.

Queensland *is* undeniably different from the rest of Australia because of the population and political strength of its many regional cities, making Brisbane less the focus of political attention than capitals in other states.⁹ Despite the suburban lifestyle enjoyed by most Queenslanders now and

9 Williams, 'Queensland's Role in the 2019 Australian Federal Election', 154.

in the past, the state's regionalism is often used by feature journalists and historians to present Queensland as a 'rural' state with a rural culture. Supposed manifestations of this country-minded 'Queensland difference' have included a more relaxed lifestyle, a slower pace, a more casual outlook, an innate desire to develop the land for commercial purposes and an uncomplicated, friendly persona.¹⁰

The idea of 'Queensland difference' was part of the national conversation long before Bjelke-Petersen drew media attention to his Queensland chauvinism in the 1970s. For example, a version of 'Queensland difference' defined by a local sense of unjust neglect by the Commonwealth can be traced to the Federation era (1901–10). When Queensland joined the Commonwealth, it was placed at a distinct economic disadvantage. At a time when the state was suffering severe long-term drought, the Queensland Government lost major sources of revenue such as postal services (fully transferred to the Commonwealth); moreover, the federal imposition of interstate free trade meant that the state's emerging manufacturing sector could not compete effectively with NSW and Victoria. The Commonwealth's decision to deport Pacific Island labourers after 1906 also disturbed sugar farmers who had become reliant on Islander workers to cut their cane because Europeans were not attracted to the industry.¹¹ These factors encouraged local resentment against the Commonwealth, and a Queensland secession movement briefly emerged in 1902 attracting the somewhat tentative support of Queensland Premier Robert Philp, who told the press that many former Federationists would 'be glad ... to see the Union dissolved'.¹² Faced with the constitutional difficulty of withdrawing from the Federation, Philp soon backed down. It was an early attempt by a Queensland political leader to distract attention from local problems by scapegoating the Commonwealth.¹³

10 See, for example: Lech Blaine, 'How Good is Queensland?', *Monthly* (November 2019): 21–33; Paul D. Williams, 'Leaders and Political Culture: The Development of the Queensland Premiership, 1859–2009', *Queensland Review* 16, no. 1 (2009): 15–34, doi.org/10.1017/S1321816600004943; John Harms, 'Queensland: What is it?', *Monthly* (October 2005): 30–40.

11 For Queensland conditions at the time of Federation, see, for example: Christina Ealing-Godbolding, 'Legislating for Transformation: Conditions for the Working Class in Brisbane 1900–1910', in *Transforming Labour: Work, Workers, Struggle and Change*, ed. Bradley Bowen and John Keller (West End, Qld: Brisbane Labour History Association, 2003), 115; D. P. Crook, 'Queensland Politics from 1900 to 1915' (BA penultimate thesis, University of Queensland, 1957), 63; Anon., *Our First Half Century: A Review of Queensland Progress* (Brisbane: Queensland Government, 1909), 46–47.

12 'General Election', *Brisbane Courier*, 4 February 1902, 5.

13 See: Robert Philp (Premier), *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 25 September 1902, 663–64.

After this brief flirtation with secession, Queenslanders became accustomed to being a state within the Federation of Australia. Generous Commonwealth financial incentives enabled the sugar industry to replace Pacific Islanders with European labourers, and the official state identity began to revolve around primary industry and taming the wilderness.¹⁴ A government tourist brochure from 1935, aptly entitled *Queensland is Different*, reflected a vision of a simple, rustic people who nonetheless were owed much by the nation as a whole. This was due to allegedly proving, by their presence, persistence and hard work, that white men could work in a tropical climate and prevent the so-called empty northern half of Australia from being invaded by non-Europeans by the deterrence of permanent settlement:¹⁵

Radiant Queensland, lavishly endowed by Nature, generous and open-hearted, bids you welcome. A million Queenslanders proud of their fruitful, smiling heritage, modestly invite you to see their achievements ... to appreciate their difficulties, sympathise with their aspirations, and accept a hospitality as warm and genial as their sunny climate ... a vulnerable outpost of [the British] Empire [has been] made secure against the invader by a race of sturdy Australians whose virility ... has not been impaired by their continued residence in the tropics.¹⁶

By the mid-twentieth century, a sense of ‘Queensland difference’ was being expressed adamantly by both Queenslanders and ‘southerners’. Queensland politicians became frustrated by the failure of Commonwealth governments to seriously consider funding a range of development projects in the northern state, their assumption being that Queensland was generally regarded as a marginal concern in a national political scene dominated by NSW and Victorian politicians. This ‘Queensland against the Federation’ mentality was expressed in Queensland Premier Ned

¹⁴ See: Patricia Mercer, *White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander Settlement in North Queensland* (Townsville: James Cook University, 1995), 77, 95; Marjorie Pagani, *T. W. Crawford: Politics and the Queensland Sugar Industry* (Townsville: James Cook University, 1990), 34; Clive Moore, “‘Good-Bye, Queensland, Good-Bye White Australia; Good-Bye Christians’: The South Sea Islander Community and Deportation, 1901–1908”, *New Federalist*, no. 4 (1999): 23.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the idea of the ‘empty north’ and the fear of invasion it engendered, see, for example: Russell McGregor, *Environment, Race and Nationhood in Australia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–43, doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-91509-5_1.

¹⁶ Queensland Government Tourist Bureau, *Queensland is Different* (Brisbane: Queensland Government, c. 1935), accessed 8 July 2021, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2438513021.

Hanlon's unsuccessful attempt in 1947 to use Queensland's proximity to the Pacific War zone to persuade Prime Minister Ben Chifley to fund north Queensland bridges and other infrastructure:

The Burdekin River is much more important to the safety of Australia than is the Murray River. Your attitude has changed now because the Japanese are safely put away for a generation, but they have not been put away for all time. The northern part of Australia was considered to be very important a few years ago. The Burdekin River has just as much right to development as any other river.¹⁷

In the early 1960s, visiting British journalist Jeanne MacKenzie observed that:

Queensland is both socially and economically backward ... When I was in Mackay I asked a local journalist what made the town 'tick'. He replied: 'It doesn't. It oozes—sugar' ... [In Queensland] There are noticeably fewer new buildings, fewer supermarkets; the hospitals and schools looked more dilapidated ... there are fewer gadgets in the home, fewer motels ... Other Australians refer to it with tolerant disparagement as 'Bananaland'.¹⁸

As these words were being written, Queensland's economic and social demographics were gradually changing as a result of multinational investment in the state's mineral resources, along with an increasing emphasis on tourism in centres such as the Gold Coast. Greater prosperity led to raised electoral expectations between the 1960s and 1980s: the Queensland Government was now 'catching up' with the southern states, investing more in schools, tertiary institutions, infrastructure projects such as main roads, and events such as the Commonwealth Games. Similarly, local authorities spent more on community initiatives such as libraries, art galleries and civic theatres.¹⁹ But during the 1950s and 1960s, Queensland was known across the nation more for its economic potential than any tangible achievements. As Prime Minister R. G. Menzies wrote: 'one constantly feels the thrill which comes from the knowledge that the

17 Hanlon, in 'Extract of Report of the Premiers' Conference, August, 1947, NADC [Northern Australia Development Committee] Interim Reports', National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A9816 1946/302 PART 3.

18 Jeanne MacKenzie, *Australian Paradox* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1962), 215–16, 220.

19 See: Ross Fitzgerald, Lyndon Megarrity and David Symons, *Made in Queensland: A New History* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009), ch. 6.

future possibilities of Queensland are unrivalled'.²⁰ Tellingly, Queensland is mentioned only briefly in Donald Horne's iconic critique of 1960s Australia, *The Lucky Country* (1964), which largely dismisses its relevance to the national scene:

Brisbane ... is a city with its jacket off and its sleeves rolled up, hot, languorous, at times sensually indolent—generous in tropical flowers, beer, hospitality, dominated in politics by Catholics for half a century, now by the Methodists (the brothels have been closed). It is the least capital of Australian cities ... the big firms in New South Wales ... see Brisbane as just a branch manager town, a city of also-rans. Brisbane is a man's city—matey, slow to change and a bit rough around the edges.²¹

The Queensland sense of being ignored or at best patronised by 'southerners' is shown poignantly in British author Jeanne Heal's 1959 travelogue *A Thousand and One Australians*. On her travels, she met the wife of the Brisbane manager of the Golden Circle Pineapple cannery, who implored the writer to:

Please say nice things about us. So many people come out here and find fault and we do try so hard. Are we really very backward? We do so badly want not to be. I don't think people realise how much they hurt us.²²

At least one postwar federal politician saw the potential for 'Queensland difference'—or, more accurately, a sense of Queensland being unjustly neglected by the Commonwealth—to become a key campaigning focus for his party at election time.

Whitlam's Political Discovery and Championing of Queensland, 1958–72

Apart from being stationed in towns like Cooktown as a Royal Australian Air Force officer during World War II, Whitlam had little association with Queensland during his formative years.²³ During the postwar era,

20 R. G. Menzies, 'A Special Message from the Prime Minister of Australia' in *Queensland Centenary: The First 100 Years 1859–1959* (Brisbane: Penrod Publishing, 1959), unpaginated.

21 Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1986 [1964]), 52.

22 Jeanne Heal, *A Thousand and One Australians* (London: Michael Joseph, 1959), 156.

23 For Whitlam in Cooktown, see: Jenny Hocking *Gough Whitlam: A Moment in History*, 97–98.

the young lawyer lived with his family in Sydney's southern and western suburbs, where the population was growing faster than the supply of social amenities and basic infrastructure such as hospitals and schools. Much of Whitlam's intellectual energies in the 1950s and 1960s went into policies designed to improve the quality of life in metropolitan areas, a focus somewhat alien to the contemporary Queensland political emphasis on land development and addressing the concerns of regional towns.

Queensland nevertheless captured Whitlam's attention as he sought to make a name for himself as a federal Labor MP during the 1950s. His interest in the northern state was sparked by the 1958 Commonwealth election, during which the Australian Labor Party (ALP) lost the Queensland seat of Herbert, a Townsville-based electorate held by Labor for three decades.²⁴ This outcome suggested to Whitlam that Labor needed to spend more time building its electoral profile in northern Australia. While, technically speaking, northern Australia included the northern parts of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, Whitlam's political focus tended to be on Queensland, the state with the highest population in the north.

As deputy leader of the ALP from 1960 to 1967, Whitlam made a strong effort to portray himself as a champion of Queensland progress and future development. Indeed, northern development was a major policy theme during Labor's campaign for the 1961 federal election, which the ALP only narrowly lost. Candidate for the division of Oxley and future Opposition leader (1977–83) Bill Hayden later recalled Whitlam's energetic attempts to persuade Queenslanders to vote Labor in 1961:

Whitlam dazzled the Queensland electorate. On a platform of northern development he mesmerised the northerners with visions of rivers being turned inland and running backwards, of dams and roads littering the vast and sparsely populated top end of the country ... Thereafter Queensland loved Whitlam. Whitlam's economics might have been fractured but his vision was perfect. It was this vision which helped get me elected.²⁵

²⁴ For general details about Whitlam's foray into Queensland politics during the 1960s, see Gough Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972–1975* (Ringwood: Viking, 1985), 230–31, 760–63; Lyndon Megarity, 'Northern Visions: The Commonwealth and the North since 1945', *Northern Territory Historical Studies*, no. 27 (2016): 26–36.

²⁵ Bill Hayden, *Hayden: An Autobiography* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1996), 68–69.

Labor increased its Queensland representation in 1961 from three to 11 seats: this constituted over half of the state's 18 House of Representatives seats. The success of the ALP's 1961 campaign in Queensland showed that a regional focus on 'northern neglect' was an effective electoral strategy. Although Labor subsequently lost Herbert and several other Queensland seats to the Liberal–Country Party Coalition as the decade progressed, Whitlam was not discouraged. He continued to emphasise Queensland and the 'neglected' north in his policymaking and political statements throughout the 1960s.

Whitlam's passion for campaigning on the issue of Queensland and its alleged neglect by the Commonwealth reached its height in 1966. In this year, Whitlam helped former public servant Dr Rex Patterson win the Mackay-centred seat of Dawson in a by-election with a swing of 12 per cent. This achievement was influential in gaining crucial Queensland support for Whitlam's internal struggles against the Labor hierarchy. By openly and publicly criticising the ALP federal executive's decision compelling Labor MPs to oppose state aid to non-government schools, Whitlam's political future hung in the balance. Because the Queensland delegates on the federal executive switched their votes, Whitlam narrowly escaped expulsion from the ALP in March 1966 on the grounds of 'gross disloyalty'. He owed this result to the new member for Dawson, who found out by chance that Labor leader Arthur Calwell was boasting of having the numbers to oust Whitlam from the party. Patterson informed Queensland State Secretary Tom Burns, who then telephoned Queensland delegates and convinced them to change their votes.²⁶

Small wonder that as leader of the Opposition from 1967 to 1972, Whitlam felt a special connection to Queenslanders, who, after all, had helped raise his political profile and saved him from political oblivion. Noting that the number of federal ALP seats in Queensland had fallen to six compared to the Coalition's 12 by 1968, there was a touch of nostalgia in Whitlam's rallying cry to Queensland's party faithful in the late 1960s:

26 Lyndon Megarrity, *Northern Dreams: The Politics of Northern Development in Australia* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018), 106.

In the rural and provincial areas in Queensland we have shown what we can do, if we have the candidate ... I will continue ... to visit this State as often as there is a reasonable opportunity for us to advance the Labor cause. Give us the candidates and we will deliver the goods for you.²⁷

By the late 1960s, the ALP campaign strategy in Queensland was settled. An advertisement with photographs and mini-biographies of Whitlam and Queensland ALP candidates for 1969 had the symbolic heading: 'Isn't It Time We Took Australia's Future Seriously? ... and Put an End to Federal Neglect of Queensland'.²⁸ Such media messages implicitly relied on appealing to the electorate's perceived sense of Queensland neglect by Canberra along with a belief that the state and its people were seen as unimportant and peripheral within the national conversation.²⁹ There was certainly an element of truth to this perception in the 1960s and early 1970s. Southern projects such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme continued to attract more Commonwealth investment and attention than northern projects,³⁰ and Labor could and did point to infrastructure neglect in remote areas of Queensland.³¹ In the lead-up to the 1970 half-Senate election, for example, Whitlam suggested that 'Queensland's future' was being held back by the Liberal–Country Party government's sluggish attitude to its development:

Ten months ago the Department of National Development prepared a document which discussed in depth developments in natural resources[,] particularly minerals, forests, water and energy. Ten months have passed—the Gorton Government has not yet got around to examining the report, much less acting upon it.³²

27 Gough Whitlam, speech, Queensland Labor-in-Politics Convention, Surfers Paradise, 6 February 1968, NAA: M170 68/3.

28 'Isn't It Time We Took Australia's Future Seriously? ... and Put an End to Federal Neglect of Queensland' [advertisement], *Courier-Mail*, 24 October 1969, 5.

29 See Harry Akers, Michael Foley and Pauline Ford, "'Remember Who We Are": An Analysis of Brand Queensland', *Queensland History Journal* 22, no. 6 (2014): 495–506; Henry Reynolds, 'Queensland: Past and Future', *Island Magazine*, no. 14 (1983): 33–36.

30 See: Megarrity, *Northern Dreams*, 100.

31 For examples of Labor campaigning on the neglect of Queensland, see: 'Whitlam Flays "Failure" over North', *Canberra Times* (hereafter *CT*), 9 September 1967, 1; 'Whitlam Pledges Money for Qld', *CT*, 13 October 1969, 3; 'Whitlam Says Qld. Standards Lowest', *Courier-Mail*, 4 May 1971, clipping held by Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney; 'The Future of Central Queensland: Trade, Power, Water', Speech by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. E. G. Whitlam, Opening the Rockhampton Show, 19 June 1969, held at Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

32 Gough Whitlam, 'Queensland Broadcast No. 8: For Broadcast 15.11.70', transcript held at Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

The Commonwealth under Menzies and his successors had invested in some substantial Queensland projects in the 1960s, such as the development of beef roads for pastoralists, the establishment of a substantial army base in Townsville (1966) and the opening of the Townsville branch of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation.³³ However, Whitlam offered a cynical interpretation of such federal initiatives, asserting that Queensland only gained attention from the ‘Canberra Liberals’ when ‘Queensland votes Labor’:

You [Queenslanders] know this from your experience. Queensland suddenly became very important after the 1961 elections—after years of neglect. After 1963, Queensland was again ignored. Then in 1966 Rex Patterson won the Dawson by-election for the Labor Party, and the sugar industry ... and northern development ... became important in Liberal eyes, for the general election of 1966. One can only assume from this year’s Budget that the Liberals again believe that Queensland is in the bag. For the first time in living memory, the Budget contained no new development proposals.³⁴

Whitlam presented himself as the man to end the ‘neglect of Queensland’ by showcasing positive policies that suggested that the future of Australia was in part tied up with the mineral and rural resources of Queensland, insisting that ‘what happens in the Fitzroy Basin in Central Queensland ... is important to the people who live in Fitzroy, Melbourne’.³⁵ Indeed, Whitlam’s statements brought Queensland coal and its new Japanese and US investors to the front and centre of his nationalist agenda:

Mr Whitlam said the governments should hang their heads in shame over the price being paid for the exploitation of mineral resources ... The new coal deposits in Queensland were controlled by overseas interests ... [Whitlam said that] ‘The Commonwealth Government has powers to ensure adequate processing in Australia. Export of ore should be made conditional on the establishment of processing plants within a certain period’.³⁶

33 Peter Bell, *Our Place in the Sun: A Brief History of James Cook University 1960–2010* (Townsville: James Cook University, 2010), 26; ‘Patterson Minister Who Knows the North’, *Northern Territory News*, 5 December 1973, 8.

34 Gough Whitlam, ‘Queensland Broadcast No. 5’, aired 14 September 1969, held at Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

35 E. G. Whitlam, *Opening Address: 1967 Senate Election* [speech at Blacktown Civic Centre, 13 November 1967], copy held at Mitchell Library.

36 ‘Whitlam Critical of Mineral Exploitation’, *CT*, 14 February 1966, 9.

He made 'no bones about it': what Queensland 'has to offer the whole nation, the whole continent, should be emphasised throughout Australia'. Making reference to Labor wins in by-elections for Dawson (1966) and Capricornia (1967), the Opposition leader believed that Queenslanders were receptive to his nationalist development focus:

It is a disgrace to this nation that the whole of Cape York [i.e. its economic resources] ... has gone into foreign hands. Governments could have made the facilities available to keep it largely or wholly in Australian hands ... Now, with proper government initiative, and that's what socialism is about in these days, we could have made certain that Australia's resources were properly used by Australians ... Now we have effectively convinced Queenslanders, whenever there has been the opportunity given to us, of these propositions.³⁷

It is probable that, at least in part, the Whitlam team's state campaigning contributed to the incremental rise in the number of Queensland members of the House of Representatives elected: from six (1966) to seven (1969) then eight (1972).³⁸ Meanwhile, Whitlam sought to downplay the role of the state government in creating further Queensland development, claiming that:

The people of Central Queensland and North Queensland will know that the place and pace of the development of the resources and opportunities in these regions depends on Canberra, not Brisbane.³⁹

In this statement, the contradictions in Whitlam's appeal to Queensland electors is made clear. On the one hand, he emphasised Queensland's potentially distinctive contribution to national development; on the other, he stressed Commonwealth rather than local control of that development. Whitlam's assumptions about where the power lay in Queensland were sorely tested once he became prime minister in 1972.

37 Whitlam, speech, Queensland Labor-in-Politics Convention, Surfers Paradise, 6 February 1968.

38 Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, 761. Reflected in the ALP's 1972 TV election campaign, 'It's Time', the nationwide mood for change away from the 23-year-old Liberal-Country Party government may also have been influential. See Mark Peel and Christina Twomey, *A History of Australia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 237.

39 'Speech by the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. E. G. Whitlam ... at a Public Meeting, Brighton Hotel, Sandgate, Brisbane, Friday 8 November 1968', in ALP Meeting Sandgate Queensland 8 November 1968, NAA: M170 68/104.

Enter the Fox: Joh Bjelke-Petersen

Born in 1911, Johannes (Joh) Bjelke-Petersen was only five years older than Whitlam, but their backgrounds were worlds apart. Whereas Whitlam grew up in Canberra in a comfortable, educated, middle-class environment, Bjelke-Petersen's formative years were spent on a farm in Queensland's Kingaroy district with his highly religious Lutheran family. By the age of 14, he was working full-time on the land, supporting his parents on their rural property. Before his election to state parliament as a Country Party MP in 1947, Bjelke-Petersen 'owned and operated a successful contract harvesting and earthmoving business'.⁴⁰ Serving as a member of the Frank Nicklin-led Country Party-Liberal Coalition government (1957-68), Bjelke-Petersen was subsequently appointed minister for works and housing (1963-68). He became premier in 1968 after the untimely death of Jack Pizzey.⁴¹

Bjelke-Petersen's premiership did not start well. The abstemious new premier had a limited affinity with his beer-drinking, gambling political colleagues, and was not naturally gregarious in his dealings with the general public. Crucially, Bjelke-Petersen's media skills represented the man as more angry than articulate when defending himself and fellow government MPs from charges of conflicts of interest over their personal or family shareholdings in companies such as Comalco, which had mining operations in Queensland. The premier's authority was also challenged internally by the presence of leadership rivals, such as Liberal leader Gordon Chalk, who, having been acting premier (1-8 August 1968), still nursed a strong desire to head up a government dominated by the Liberal Party. Narrowly surviving an attempt by his own party to remove him from office in 1970, Bjelke-Petersen subsequently shored up his leadership by transforming his political image. From then on, the premier would carefully craft a reputation as a ruthless political operator who would 'go in hard' against opponents, chiefly Labor and radical protestors.

40 Fitzgerald, Megarrity and Symons, *Made in Queensland*, 157.

41 For Bjelke-Petersen's early life, see: James Walter, 'Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: "The Populist Autocrat"', in *The Premiers of Queensland*, ed. Denis Murphy, Roger Joyce, Margaret Cribb and Rae Wear (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003 [1990]), 304-09.

A key aspect of Bjelke-Petersen's survival, however, was support from the Queensland Country Party's head office, which saw electoral dangers in a disunified coalition.⁴²

As the early 1970s progressed, Bjelke-Petersen and his Coalition government took advantage of their incumbency by devoting substantial public funds towards building the premier's profile within the local and national media and making the leader highly accessible to journalists. As the premier noted:

I am one of those who like the Press. They can get at me at any time from Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne. They even ring me at home. I never hesitate to talk to them. I say to the local boys that they are a little bit like my chooks: they have to be fed every morning.⁴³

A key part of his image was as a man of the land who retained a family farm near Kingaroy and was 'in touch' with regional Queensland, an important perception in a state where electors were often distant from the state capital and resentful of 'Brisbane government'. To show support for isolated districts, the Bjelke-Petersen administration purchased a plane that enabled him, in the 1974 state elections, to 'hold 70 political meetings strung out along a flight path 13,000 miles long'.⁴⁴ Bjelke-Petersen was impatient with criticism that the state-owned plane gave him an unfair advantage over the then state Opposition leader, who was officially permitted access only to free commercial flights:

If he [Perc Tucker] wants the aeroplane[,] let him win the government ... They criticised us for buying the plane: now they say there should be two. He would be a hypocrite to get into it. We're not like the Commonwealth with half a dozen VIP jets. We have one plane, and one Premier. Let him ask Gough Whitlam to restore the subsidies that wiped out country air services.⁴⁵

42 James Walter and Kay Dickie, 'Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: A Political Portrait', in *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership 1968–1983*, ed. Allan Patience (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1985), 35; Cameron Hazelhurst, *Gordon Chalk: A Political Life* (Toowoomba: Darling Downs Institute Press, 1987), 232, 244, 249; John Wanna and Tracey Arklay, *The Ayes Have It: The History of the Queensland Parliament 1957–89* (Canberra, ANU E Press, 2010), 312–19, doi.org/10.22459/AH.07.2010.

43 L. E. Mirtschin, 'Queensland Premier Speaks at Gatton', *Lutheran* 9, no. 19 (29 September 1975): 9, in Premier of Queensland, 1975, [part 2 of 2 parts], 1 July 1975 [box 3], NAA: M515 14.

44 David Marr, 'Joh Flies the Campaign Trail', *Bulletin* (Sydney), 23 November 1974, 12.

45 *Ibid.*, 13.

Apart from glimpses of his developing political arrogance and vanity, the above quotation showcases Bjelke-Petersen's instinctive employment of 'Queensland difference' rhetoric to deal with political issues. There were many instances throughout Bjelke-Petersen's career where the premier's own personal preferences influenced state policies in a way that made Queensland seem 'different', including the banning of sexually permissive material long after the practice trailed off in other states, as well as the appearance of government support for the use of excessive police force against student demonstrators.⁴⁶ In appealing to electors, however, the premier's emphasis on the right of Queensland to follow a different path to a Commonwealth-dominated national consensus was what strengthened Bjelke-Petersen's domestic political grip during the Whitlam era.

The Lion versus the Fox: The Prime Minister and the Premier

Soon after the federal ALP formed an administration in December 1972, it came into conflict with the Queensland Government. Premier Bjelke-Petersen was pugnacious in his defence of states' rights, and Whitlam was equally determined to pursue his Commonwealth-focused policy agenda across Queensland and elsewhere. In a 1973 speech in Brisbane, Whitlam said:

I suppose, like me, you have occasionally detected a slight sense of estrangement between Mr Bjelke-Petersen's Government and mine ... I seek an end to it ... Queensland is a great state ... in many ways the proudest and most individualistic of all ... Yet I have to say that in many ways you are behind the rest of us.⁴⁷

The patronising tone of that last sentence is symbolic of Whitlam's increasing failure during his prime ministership to connect with a Queensland audience that resented southern 'put-downs'. Whitlam's open and intense

46 Ray Whitrod, *Before I Sleep* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2001), 177–78; 'Students, Police in Fiery Clash', *Courier-Mail*, 23 July 1971, 1; Peter Applegarth, 'Civil Liberties', in *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership*, ed. Allan Patience (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1985), 148–50.

47 Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr E. G. Whitlam to the Annual Dinner of the Queensland Chamber of Manufacturers, Lennon's Plaza Hotel, Brisbane, Monday 1 October 1973 [box 10], NAA: M533 176.

frustration with the Queensland premier's obstructionist attitude merely increased that sense of distance between the Commonwealth and the northern state.

Bjelke-Petersen was disturbed by the Whitlam government for many reasons. In the first place, the Whitlam era challenged old certainties about Australia's relationship with Britain. Among other things, 1973 legislation styled Elizabeth II as 'Queen of Australia', dropping references to the United Kingdom. The imperial honours scheme was scrapped, and the Whitlam government also hoped to terminate the right to appeal a legal case in the UK Privy Council.⁴⁸ Bjelke-Petersen defied Whitlam's downplaying of Australia's royal connection by pushing for the Queen to also be given the title 'Queen of Queensland' (royal approval ultimately being granted in 1977)⁴⁹ and rejecting Whitlam's assertion that 'Advance Australia Fair' should be, for all intents and purposes, viewed as Australia's national anthem. Bjelke-Petersen insisted that, as in the past, the national song was 'God Save the Queen', the playing of which was greeted with applause at various Queensland Anzac Day ceremonies in 1974.⁵⁰

Even more worrying from Bjelke-Petersen's perspective was the combined shock of the first federal Labor government in 23 years and Whitlam's centralist style of policy, which implied a lesser, or at least subservient, role for the states in the federal system. For example, the Whitlam government's pursuit of greater national ownership and control of mineral resources contrasted sharply with the Queensland Government's established pattern of enthusiastically encouraging the presence of foreign mining companies and overseas capital.⁵¹ Bjelke-Petersen soon embarked on a political campaign to frustrate 'the moves by the present Commonwealth Government to alter Constitutional relationships [with the states] other than by the accepted process'.⁵² The premier railed

48 See: Rae Wear, *Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: The Lord's Premier* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002), 38; Joh Bjelke-Petersen, *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 21 November 1973, 1831; Brian Carroll, *Whitlam* (Dural: Rosenberg Publishing Pty Ltd, 2011), 106–08.

49 'Queen's Land Now', *CT*, 7 April 1977, 3.

50 M. N. B. C., 'Queensland: Australian Political Chronicles January to April 1974', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 20, no. 2 (1974): 244; "'God Save the Queen" to be Used in Qld', *CT*, 8 May 1974, 7.

51 Ross Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland from 1915 to the 1980s* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 326–29.

52 Cabinet Submission no. 17655 (Joh Bjelke-Petersen), 3 December 1973, in O'Connell, telex on dismissal of Whitlam 3 December 1973 – Confidential, Constitutional Matters – Retention of Counsel, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA): Item ID2645079, Papers.

against what he described as the ‘socialist policy of the Prime Minister ... centralist control from Canberra; the ultimate elimination or gagging of the States’ and ‘the setting up of a republic in Australia to be patterned on the Communist way of life’.⁵³

Bjelke-Petersen’s hyperbolic rhetorical style made him appear a figure of fun to state and national journalists, but his states’ rights protests had some political and administrative substance. In resisting Whitlam’s proposal for the Commonwealth to take over the state rail system, Bjelke-Petersen eloquently argued that the railways were an important state government policy lever, noting that ‘railways are an instrument in assisting development—e.g. special freight rates—and cannot be lightly let go out of the State’s control’.⁵⁴

The premier’s skill as a state’s rights warrior was sharpest when Whitlam pressured him over the issue of Australia’s border with Papua New Guinea (PNG).⁵⁵ In order to remove a potential source of conflict with soon-to-be independent PNG and the United Nations, Whitlam was convinced that Queensland should give up sovereignty over a substantial portion of the Torres Strait. This would involve ceding some Queensland islands to the PNG Government, a suggestion that upset the several hundred islanders potentially affected. They were concerned that Whitlam’s promise of continued Australian Government benefits after the transition to PNG rule would ultimately be hollow. Although the Queensland Government had developed a well-deserved reputation for hostility to the emerging public policy trend of supporting Indigenous self-determination and land rights,⁵⁶ Bjelke-Petersen posed as the Torres Strait Islanders’ champion:

53 Joh Bjelke-Petersen, *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 21 November 1973, 1831.

54 Meeting between the Prime Minister and Premier of Queensland at the Premier’s Office, Executive Building, Brisbane, 23 March at 11.30 am, NAA: A1209 1973/6297.

55 For background see: ‘Queensland Border Dispute Coming to the Boil’, *CT*, 3 February 1973, 2; ‘Whitlam Urges New Border’, *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*, 26 September 1972, 7. As far back as 1965, Whitlam had been pushing for the border between PNG and Australia to be redrawn. See: ‘Problem of Papua’s Offshore Islands’, *CT*, 22 December 1965, 2.

56 Jamie Walker, *Goss: A Political Biography* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1995), 30–44. Among other things, an old-fashioned ‘assimilationist’ attitude remained within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. For example, the Indigenous ‘outstation movement’, designed to encourage the development of Aboriginal communities in remote areas, was condemned by department head P. J. Killoran, who regarded Commonwealth support for it as ‘deliberately re-inforcing the mendicant scarecrow image of [Aboriginal people]’. See: Lyndall Ryan, ‘Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders’, in *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership*, ed. Allan Patience (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1985), 121.

I personally consider it to be an attitude of complete disloyalty even to suggest that we should ignore the rights of these people as fellow Queenslanders and Australians, and virtually give them away ... These islands are part of Queensland. Their inhabitants are fellow Queenslanders, and they want to remain in Queensland.⁵⁷

Whatever the premier's true beliefs, which might have included a desire to retain sovereignty over land with commercial possibilities, Bjelke-Petersen's grassroots championing of the Islanders contrasted sharply with Whitlam's more abstract concerns over international diplomacy. Unlike Whitlam, who merely received Islander representatives in Canberra, Bjelke-Petersen personally visited the Torres Strait Islands and reaped the publicity benefits.⁵⁸ The notion that Bjelke-Petersen was fighting for Queensland's rights played well with Queenslanders, as the *Canberra Times* argued:

As residents of a long-time 'branch office State' many Queenslanders resent direction from 'the South'. They may not give a damn for the islanders' rights, but they are angered when a suave Sydney lawyer tries to snip a piece off Queensland.⁵⁹

The Torres Strait Islands remained fully attached to Queensland by the end of Whitlam's term in office and the border issue gradually faded from the national agenda. Ultimately, negotiations between Queensland and the Commonwealth broke down over Bjelke-Petersen's desire to reserve Queensland's right to decide on mineral exploitation of the region.⁶⁰

Bjelke-Petersen refused to countenance any Whitlam initiative that appeared to increase federal Labor powers. For example, the premier declined Whitlam's proposal to transform Townsville into a regional growth centre, because it implied Commonwealth involvement in the

57 Joh Bjelke-Petersen, *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 28 September 1972, 786.

58 'I remember last time you asked me to come to your islands. I still intend to come.' Copy, Prime Minister's Speech to the Torres Strait Island Delegation, Sydney, 30 June 1975, in Border between Queensland and Papua New Guinea File 649, QSA: Item ID541034, Batch File. For Joh's well-publicised 1973 trip to the Torres Strait, see: Derek Townsend, *Jigsaw: The Biography of Johannes Bjelke-Petersen* (Brisbane: Sneyd & Morley, 1983), 329–33.

59 'Queensland Border Dispute Coming to the Boil', *CT*, 3 February 1973, 2.

60 See: statement by Gough Whitlam in *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 9 October 1975, 1995–2002. The Council for Aboriginal Affairs (Nugget Coombs, Barry Dexter and W. E. F. (Bill) Stanner) advised Whitlam as early as March 1973 that it might be possible to preserve Australian sovereignty over the islands affected by the proposed relocation of the PNG–Australia border. See: Council for Aboriginal Affairs to Prime Minister, 19 March 1973, in Prime Minister's Visit to Queensland 23 March 1973 – Briefing Notes, NAA: A1209 1973/6231.

planning and development of new residential areas.⁶¹ Growth centres planned by the federal government, like the city of Albury–Wodonga, produced ‘artificial’ decentralisation, according to Bjelke-Petersen. On the other hand, the premier asserted, with some justification, that commercial investment in Queensland mining resulted in ‘natural decentralisation’:

We have continued our policy of encouraging Australian and overseas investment in our State’s resources. Again, this is providing jobs for miners, railwaymen, people in service industries, teachers, policemen and for all those in the new towns like Weipa, Blackwater, Moura, Goonyella ... and Greenvale, as well as in our existing cities like Townsville ... Mackay and Gladstone ... Our coal, oil and natural gas fields have made Queensland—and Australia—independent of the energy crisis facing other nations.⁶²

Bjelke-Petersen baffled Whitlam. Unlike the Liberal premiers in Victoria and NSW, who often cooperated with Whitlam’s agenda or at least were open to discussion, the Queensland premier was tardy in replying to the prime minister’s letters and was reluctant to socialise with him. Bjelke-Petersen’s approach to his official relationship with Whitlam reflected a relentless anti-centralisation rhetoric that assumed that Queensland had the right to determine its own cultural and political direction. Bjelke-Petersen’s confidence in his capacity to defend Queensland’s constitutional authority against Commonwealth encroachment was fortified by his access to a range of legal advisers. These included D. P. O’Connell, Chichele Professor of Public International Law at Oxford University, who the premier saw as ‘the vital link in a chain of legal people from whom we can seek advice’, and who he wanted to prevent being poached by the Commonwealth. Queensland Cabinet approved paying O’Connell a \$20,000 annual retainer fee for five years from January 1974.⁶³ However, despite Queensland’s supposed hatred of Whitlam’s

61 Prime Minister’s Press Statement to Brisbane Press Conference, 15 November 1974, held at Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

62 National Party – Liberal Party Government Policy Speech (Part 1) by the Premier of Queensland Hon. Joh. Bjelke-Petersen, MLA delivered at Southport 4 November 1974, in Premier of Queensland, 1974 [part 2 of 2 parts] 1 July 1974 – 31 December 1974 Box 3, NAA: M515 12.

63 Cabinet Submission no. 17655 (Joh Bjelke-Petersen), 3 December 1973, in O’Connell, telex on dismissal of Whitlam 3 December 1973 – Confidential, Constitutional Matters – Retention of Counsel, QSA: Item ID2645079, Papers. In this same QSA file see also: Memo Premier’s Department: G. G. Cross, 7 September 1988.

centralism, it was happy to quietly accept generous Commonwealth funding for areas such as education, public hospitals, northern dams and Aboriginal housing.⁶⁴

Whitlam Struggles to Get the Labor Message across to Queensland, 1974–75

Frustrated by Bjelke-Petersen's personalised version of 'Queensland difference', and understandably distracted by national concerns, Whitlam gradually allowed his relationship with the Queensland electorate to deteriorate. During the 1960s, the rising Labor leader had skilfully employed the notion that Queensland interests were neglected by the Commonwealth in his appeals to local voters; ironically, in the 1970s, Prime Minister Whitlam himself was accused of Queensland neglect.

From 1974, the Whitlam government's popularity in Queensland began to decline. Indeed, so focused was Whitlam on his government's push towards more independent bilateral relationships with foreign countries that his domestic political instincts dulled, at least in assessing the mood of the Queensland electorate. During the Brisbane floods of January 1974, Whitlam sent a message of sympathy but pressed on with his overseas tour, sparking anger from Brisbane residents. When Whitlam briefly visited Brisbane on his way back to Canberra on 13 February, he did not leave the airport and was dismissive of the local media:

A reporter asked: 'What do you say to criticism that you did not come during the floods?' In answer, Whitlam picked up his papers, strode past the television cameras, past the dozens of people who had come to see him, and left ... Queensland behind him.⁶⁵

Certainly, Whitlam's press secretary, Graham Freudenberg, later reflected that Whitlam's inability to comprehend the political significance of the floods was a major turning point in the prime minister's relationship with the state:

64 Denise Conroy, 'Federal-State Relations', in *The Bjelke-Petersen Premiership 1968–1983*, ed. Allan Patience (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1985), 255–59.

65 Hugh Lunn, *Job: The Life and Political Adventures of Johannes Bjelke-Petersen* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 160. See also: Margaret Cook, *A River with a City Problem: A History of Brisbane Floods* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2019), 116–19; 'National Disaster Plan to be Considered', *CT*, 14 February 1974, 1.

I have always thought the disastrous decline of [Whitlam's] personal standing in Queensland can be dated from the 1974 Brisbane floods, when he refused to postpone or delay his trip to ... Asia. The most he could be prevailed upon was to put down for an hour at Brisbane airport to talk to Bjelke-Petersen & offer some Federal aid.⁶⁶

Whitlam's standing fell further as 1974 progressed. Nationwide inflation and unemployment were growing concerns, but rural and regional Queensland was hit especially hard by the Whitlam government's cost-saving decision to remove petrol subsidies to country areas and to abolish the superphosphate bounty by the end of the year.⁶⁷ Whitlam also stumbled badly when he secretly arranged a diplomatic appointment for Democratic Labor Party Senator Vince Gair, former Queensland premier. Gair's appointment was designed to increase the chance of Labor gaining a Senate majority in the forthcoming half-Senate election in May 1974, with six Queensland Senate seats being contested rather than five. The news about the imminent diplomatic posting leaked out before Gair had formally resigned, allowing Premier Bjelke-Petersen and his allies time to temporarily prevent the Queensland senator from handing in his resignation to the Senate president. In an incident known as the 'Night of the Long Prawns' (2 April), the Country Party Senate whip—fellow Queenslander Ron Maunsell—obligingly distracted Gair with Townsville prawns, beer and good company to postpone the latter's formal departure from the Senate.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, the premier arranged for the Queensland governor to issue a writ for five Senate vacancies:

The move relied on an early High Court decision; Sen. Gair's resignation which had not yet been recorded would now create a casual vacancy to be filled in the first instance by the state parliament and ultimately at the next election—after the one scheduled for 11 May.⁶⁹

66 Graham Freudenberg to Lyndon Megarrity, 21 April 2011, letter in possession of author.

67 Fitzgerald, *A History of Queensland from 1915 to the 1980s*, 254; Jim Keeffe to Gough Whitlam, 15 August 1975, in *Living Conditions in Northern Australia*, NAA: AA1978/70 1973/353.

68 Wanna and Arklay, *The Ayes Have It*, 360–61; Rosemary Laing, 'Maunsell, Charles Ronald (1922–1910)' in *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate Vol. 3: 1962–85* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 346–51.

69 C. A. H., 'The Commonwealth: Australian Political Chronicle January–April 1974', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 20, no. 2 (1974): 234.

Politically humiliated, Whitlam subsequently decided that instead of holding the half-Senate election, he would hold a double dissolution election. The Gair appointment would have been acclaimed as a Machiavellian masterstroke by the press if it had succeeded on Whitlam's terms. But, yet again, Whitlam had been outfoxed and embarrassed by the Queensland premier.

The federal ALP lost two Queensland House of Representatives seats in the 1974 Commonwealth election, leaving Labor with six out of 18 members.⁷⁰ Coinciding with an increasingly worrying global economic downturn, the precariousness of Whitlam's electoral position in Queensland was useful for Bjelke-Petersen's own political ends. In campaigning for the 1974 Queensland state election, Bjelke-Petersen emphasised a number of new initiatives such as a women's advisory council and greater investment in preschools.⁷¹ Yet the premier spent much of his campaign attacking Whitlam instead of the state Opposition leader, Percy Tucker, claiming: 'It's all the one A.L.P.; pledged to the same socialist platform and to the same socialist goals.'⁷² Whitlam spent considerable time campaigning for the state ALP during the election, but was arguably too focused on airing his grievances against the premier. The prime minister also undermined the state Labor leader by making flattering comments about Queensland Liberal leader Sir Gordon Chalk, with whom he got on well and thought might be in a position to become the next premier.⁷³

The state election result was devastating for both the Queensland ALP and Whitlam himself. The Bjelke-Petersen government was victorious, while the Labor Opposition numbers in parliament dropped from 33 to 11.⁷⁴ Queensland ALP officials such as Commonwealth Northern Development Minister Rex Patterson were quick to blame Whitlam's alleged failure to understand the different nature of Queensland for this result:

70 Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, 761.

71 Henry Mayer, 'PM Must Take Bjelke Seriously', *Australian*, 12 November 1974, 10.

72 National Party – Liberal Party Government Policy Speech (Part 1) by the Premier of Queensland Hon. Joh. Bjelke-Petersen, MLA delivered at Southport 4 November 1974.

73 'Sir Gordon Chalk makes no secret of his wish to take over the Premiership. Queensland may not get her Queen but she looks certain to get a palace revolution.' Notes for the Prime Minister, Civic Square, Brisbane, 22 November 1974, in [Personal Papers of Prime Minister E G Whitlam] Speeches and Press Releases Regarding Queensland – November 1974 [box 12], NAA: M539 124. Chalk received his knighthood in 1971.

74 'Anti-Labor Fury', *CT*, 10 December 1975, 2.

Mr. Whitlam is the best national leader in Australia ... But his message ... is not getting to the people now ... The great benefits of the Federal Labor Government's achievements in education, health and social services have been completely lost because of the large number of pin-pricking policies which have been resented by Queensland and the north in general ... Queensland is fiercely parochial—a feeling which intensifies the further north one goes. Melbourne is closer to Brisbane than Cairns to [Brisbane] ... The pouring of millions of dollars into heavily-subsidised Sydney and Melbourne ... make[s] no impression in the north ... such actions only intensify the feeling of neglect when they are skilfully handled by anti-Labor forces.⁷⁵

The Queensland branch of the ALP was undoubtedly correct in surmising that many conservative Labor voters in Queensland, especially in mining and agricultural areas, had been or were in the process of being 'poached' by Bjelke-Petersen because Whitlam represented an inner city-oriented 'new' Labor that meant little to them.⁷⁶ The decision by the Queensland Country Party to change its name to the National Party in April 1974 may also have broadened its appeal to former 'dyed-in-the-wool' ALP voters.⁷⁷ But there was also a level of complacency within the Queensland Central Executive (QCE) about the election result, reflected in State Secretary Bart Lourigan's comment on the poll: 'How could anyone have withstood a tidal wave like the one that hit us on Saturday?' QCE protestations that the Whitlam government was out of touch could also be applied to the blue collar-oriented Queensland Labor hierarchy, which was unresponsive to the growth in potential Labor voters in the professions and minority groups. Tellingly, the QCE held meetings 'during the day—which meant only party officials, union officials and Parliamentarians were able to attend'.⁷⁸

A subsequent Labor-commissioned survey of Brisbane, Toowoomba and Townsville electors suggested that Commonwealth factors such as federal ALP policy and anti-rural bias were key to Labor's poor showing in the 1974 state poll. Notably, the surveyors found no great love for Bjelke-Petersen, who was frequently viewed as obsessive in his anti-Canberra attitudes. But equally evident and probably crucial to the electoral result

75 'Minister says PM Out of Touch', *Courier-Mail*, 10 December 1974, 1.

76 See: Mayer, 'PM Must Take Bjelke Seriously', 10.

77 Wanna and Arklay, *The Ayes Have It*, 359.

78 'Labor Claims Leader Lack: Call for Federal Action', *Courier-Mail*, 10 December 1974, 3.

was ‘the very defensive reaction of the Queenslanders interviewed ... in a number of the responses there were signs of the very real resentment of elitism and “southern sophistication”’. Examples of this cited included the expensive purchase of the abstract painting *Blue Poles* in 1973 and Whitlam’s overseas trips.⁷⁹

The authors of the mid-1975 survey stressed the need for the Whitlam government to acknowledge the chip on Queensland’s shoulder and change the presentation, if not the substance, of Labor policy to appeal to Queensland parochial sentiment. But before any solid work could be done on this communication strategy, Bjelke-Petersen once again got on Whitlam’s nerves. When Queensland Senator Bertie Milliner died in June 1975, the premier was expected to follow the convention of appointing a candidate from the same party, in this instance Labor, to take Milliner’s place. Instead, the premier ultimately chose 64-year-old Albert Patrick (‘Pat’) Field, a disenchanting, old-fashioned ALP branch member and public servant who made it clear to Bjelke-Petersen over ‘tea and scones at his [the premier’s] office in George Street’ that he disapproved of the Whitlam government’s general direction and would use his place in the Senate to fight the federal ALP. (‘They were about these gays and abortions ... and I didn’t like it.’)⁸⁰ Expelled from the ALP, Field’s presence in the Senate made it possible for Fraser to block supply and, in due course, force an early election.⁸¹ Furious at this turn of events, Whitlam was widely reported as referring to Bjelke-Petersen as a ‘Bible-bashing bastard’, which he later admitted was ‘a bit strong, I suppose, but he is a hypocrite and I’m entitled to say it’. In making this statement, Whitlam risked alienating the vocal minority of evangelical Christians living in Queensland regions such as the Sunshine Coast, who were already inclined to vote for Bjelke-Petersen, the devout Lutheran. As events turned out, Whitlam would soon need as many Queensland electors onside as possible.⁸²

79 Folder containing ‘A Queensland Political Research Study’ by ANOP (National Opinion Researchers of Marketing, Advertising, Political and Social Attitudes), September 1975 [box 12], NAA: M540 77.

80 David Monaghan, ‘Pat Field: The Man Who Brought Gough Whitlam Down Is Alone Again, Naturally’, *CT*, 27 October 1985, 79. Field worked as a French polisher in the Department of Public Works’ furniture repair depot.

81 See: Geoffrey Hawker, ‘Field, Alfred Patrick (1910–1990)’, in *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate, Vol. 2, 1962–1983* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 371–75.

82 ‘Criticism a Bit Strong: PM’, *CT*, 22 September 1975, 3. See also: Ray Kerkhove, ‘Towards a Multi-Faith History of the Sunshine Coast’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2004): 81.

The dismissal of the Whitlam government on 11 November precipitated the December 1975 election.⁸³ During the 1975 election battle, Whitlam tried to appeal to Queensland voters, extravagantly praising prominent Queensland ALP figures such as former ministers Bill Hayden and Doug Everingham.⁸⁴ But perhaps unwisely, Whitlam also reminded Queensland electors of his personally damaging struggle with the Queensland premier:

Queenslanders value fair play and they like straight talk ... Bjelke-Petersen tore up the rules again. He appointed a non-Labor Man [for the Senate]. He tore up the votes of more than 450,000 Queenslanders.⁸⁵

Following the 1975 federal election, the number of Queensland Labor MPs in the federal House of Representatives was reduced from six to one, in contrast to 17 newly elected Queensland Coalition members. Labor's electoral results in the Senate between 1961 and 1975 was relatively stable: two out of five seats in every half-Senate election, and four out of 10 seats for full Senate elections (1974 and 1975).⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the numbers in the Lower House determined which party was elected to office, and the heavy swing to the Coalition at the 1975 poll suggests a strong protest vote in Queensland against the Whitlam regime, assisted by Bjelke-Petersen's political strategies.

It was a sad climax to Whitlam's relationship with the Queensland electorate. As a key Labor figure in the 1960s, Whitlam had skilfully employed Queensland-focused themes to secure greater national and Queensland popularity for his party and his personal profile. With varying degrees of electoral success in Queensland, Whitlam as a politician pursued themes such as Queensland's feelings of southern neglect and scorn, and the related desire of Queenslanders to feel important and acknowledged by the nation. As prime minister, Whitlam lost touch with the Queensland electorate, allowing himself to become distracted by his personalised conflict with Bjelke-Petersen. The premier, on the other hand, was able to use his states' rights conflict with Whitlam to build up

83 Having served his purpose, Field was effectively disowned by the Bjelke-Petersen government and lack of concerted Coalition support facilitated his return to private life. Monaghan, 'Pat Field', 79.

84 'Rockhampton 8 December 1975 [Whitlam Speech]', held at Whitlam Institute, University of Western Sydney.

85 Ibid.

86 Stephen Barber, *Federal Election Results 1901–2016* (Canberra: Parliamentary Library [Commonwealth], 2017), 127; Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, 761.

his media and political reputation as a leader personifying ‘Queensland difference’, consequently developing political capital that lasted well into the 1980s.⁸⁷

The federal ALP subsequently worked hard to regain Queensland votes, most notably in the 1983 elections, during which the notion of northern neglect—and Labor’s ability to understand north Queenslanders and their concerns—was successfully used to win the north Queensland seats of Herbert and Leichhardt. Policy commitments such as a popular proposal to build the Burdekin Falls Dam, and the ALP National Executive’s very deliberate endorsement of north Queensland-based Margaret Reynolds as a Senate candidate, were designed to give substance to Labor’s claims of a special connection to Queensland. Soon-to-be Prime Minister Bob Hawke echoed the Queensland campaign style of Whitlam in the 1960s when he told north Queenslanders that ‘an ALP Government will not forget you, as governments have done in the past’.⁸⁸

Conclusion

During the 1977 state election, Bjelke-Petersen presented a somewhat ambiguous message: that Queensland was finally measuring up to the standards of NSW and Victoria, as well as making a significant national contribution in its own right:

Queensland 20 years ago was Australia’s backwater. You remember the terms—Cinderella State, Deep North, great potential, but little else. No one calls Queensland that today. Just look at the media’s coverage of Queensland! ... Our contribution of one quarter of the nation’s entire export earnings helps keep Australia afloat.⁸⁹

These words reflect the so-called ‘Queensland difference’ explored most prominently in this study: an anxious perception among Queenslanders that they were unjustly forgotten or put down by the southern states,

87 See: Peter Coaldrake, *Working the System: Government in Queensland* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989), 10–11.

88 Bob Hawke, ‘Australian Labor Party: North Queensland Policies’, February 1983, accessed 24 February 2022, parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/partypol/995077/upload_binary/995077.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22North%20Queensland%22. For further details of ALP campaigning in 1983, see: Megarrity, *Northern Dreams*, 148–52.

89 Premier, address to Queensland Press Club at Lennon’s Plaza Hotel on Wednesday 9 November 1977, in Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen Papers 1977, John Oxley Library: OM 77-58. See also Coaldrake, *Working the System*, 10–11.

combined with desire for ‘due’ recognition of Queensland and its regional districts. Bjelke-Petersen recognised this defensive style of ‘Queensland difference’ and fashioned much of his electoral appeal and personal following around addressing it: ‘It’s ordinary Queenslanders—the men and women living from Coolangatta to Saibai Island, and in the West—who have made Queensland what it is today.’⁹⁰

The above reference to Torres Strait Islanders in Saibai Island was undoubtedly an electoral reminder of Whitlam’s failure to impose Commonwealth will in Queensland over the PNG border issue. Whitlam was no longer prime minister by 1977, but Bjelke-Petersen remained in place. The premier now presumed to lecture Whitlam’s successor, Malcolm Fraser, on how the game of politics should be played. He suggested disapprovingly that the NSW premier had received all the kudos for increased federal funding for railways after the Granville train disaster:

[Fraser’s] not an old stager at the game like I am. I would have gone to the crash at Granville, I would have gone round with the TV people and said ‘I’m not going to allow that ever to happen again. I’m going to make sure no more people get killed ... I’m going to give you 100 million for your railways’.⁹¹

These words suggest that one result of Bjelke-Petersen’s periodic outfoxing of Whitlam on the national stage was the increasing hubris that would ultimately lead to his political demise in 1987.⁹² In particular, the premier’s unrealistic ‘Joh for PM’ campaign divided his own party and fatally distracted him from state matters. The ‘fox’ that had cunningly dominated Queensland state politics for nearly two decades, could not, ultimately become a federal ‘lion’ like his old foe Gough Whitlam.

The clash between Whitlam and Bjelke-Petersen casts an interesting light on the nature of the Australian federal system. Basking in the luxury of Opposition, Whitlam could pose as Queensland’s political saviour while showcasing his alternative national policies. As prime minister, his role was sharply different. In the latter role, Whitlam was expected to represent all Australians, both domestically and internationally, while still retaining empathy for regional and local sensibilities. This was a delicate balancing

90 Premier, address to Queensland Press Club, 9 November 1977.

91 Bjelke-Petersen, cited in David McNicoll, ‘The Thoughts of Premier Joh’, *Bulletin*, 8 October 1977, 25.

92 See, for example: Paul Davey, *Joh for PM: The Inside Story of an Extraordinary Political Drama* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2015), 1–6.

game, making him vulnerable to Queensland accusations of 'southern' neglect and the political machinations of Premier Bjelke-Petersen who relentlessly pursued his own version of 'Queensland difference' at the expense of Whitlam and his government.

Bjelke-Petersen's states' rights victory over Whitlam now seems anachronistic. Indeed, the federal trend towards centralism has only intensified since 1975, as successive Commonwealth governments have imposed tighter controls on social and economic policy on the states. Notwithstanding the occasional rhetorical flourish proclaiming state difference, Queensland premiers now largely conform to the Commonwealth's expectation that the states are focused on service delivery in health, education, local government and other areas, whereas 'big picture' policy initiatives tend to be the preserve of the more financially powerful federal government.⁹³

93 See: John Summers and Jan Lowe, 'The Federal System', in *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia* (9th edn), ed. Dennis Woodward, Andrew Parkin and John Summers (Frenchs Forest: Pearson Australia, 2010), 140–66.

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